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IMAGINARY SONNETS.

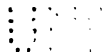
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IMAGINARY SONNETS.

BY

EUGENE LEE-HAMILTON,

AUTHOR OF 'THE NEW MEDUSA,' 'APOLLO AND MARSYAS,' ETC.



LONDON:

ELLIOT STOCK, 62, PATERNOSTER ROW.

1888.

ERRATUM.

Page 63, liline 3, *for* ' years ' *read* ' girls.

01

To
AMY TURTON.

JUN 29 '22 20 Allen 2, 2, 3

286654

*I*N the following imaginary utterances, to which he has given sonnet form, the author has not attempted to imitate either the style or the language of the time to which his respective historical or legendary figures belong. The style is his own, and the language is that of his own day. He has borrowed from the Past only a number of psychological and dramatic situations which have afforded him an opportunity of passing his hand over the great key-board of human passion, good and evil. And if in this Masque of Sonnets the darker and stormier passions play too prominent a part it is not his fault, but that of the dark and stormy centuries themselves.

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INTRODUCTORY SONNET.

*MY spirit stood and listened in its awe
Beside the great abyss where seethes the Past,
And caught the voices that were upward cast
By those whom Fate whirled on like floating straw ;
While, in the glimmering depth, I vaguely saw,
Lashed to some frail remainder of a mast,
The wretches drifting faster and more fast,
Sucked down for ever in the whirlpool's maw :
And these wild voices of despair and fear,
Of love and hate, from out the deep abyss
I treasured up, just as they struck the ear,—
Appeals which rise above the roar and hiss
Of story's turbid current high and clear ;
And by-and-bye I rhymed them into this.*

HENRY I. TO THE SEA.

(1120.)

O SEA, take all, since thou hast taken him
Whose life to me was life.—Let one wide wave
Now sweep this land, and make a single grave
For king and people. Let the wild gull skim
Where now is England ; and the sea-fish swim
In every drowned cathedral's vaulted nave,
As in a green and pillared ocean cave,
Submerged for ever, and for ever dim.
And if the shuddering pilot ventures there
And sees their pinnacles, like rocks to shun
Above the waves, and green with tidal hair,
Then let him whisper that this thing was done
By God, the Lord of Oceans, at the prayer
Of England's king, who mourned his only son.

ROGER OF SICILY TO AZALAÏS.

(1140.)

THOU hast the silence and imperial tread,
The strong and supple beauty of a pard ;
And oft I wish that I had had thee barr'd
In some firm cage, and feel a strange vague dread.
At times I fancy that thy eye-balls shed
Green fire at night ; and that, when off my guard,
Some day thou'lt spring, and hold me in thy hard
Relentless grip with all thy claws dyed red.
Some say that there are beings in human shape,
Who, having been wild beasts without a soul,
Can take beast form, and oft at night escape :
If such there be, then surely thou must prowl
In thy old semblance, when the thick clouds drape
The sallow moon, to greet her with thy howl.

MANFRED OF BENEVENTO TO HIS SARACEN
LEECH.

(1155.)

THOSE baths of blood that made my body whole
Of that foul leprosy, O priceless leech,
Unless some further remedy thou teach—
They somehow will not trickle off my soul :

For to whatever side I chance to roll
My restless eyes, each thing within their reach
Has changed to red : trees, faces, yonder beach,
All's grown as sanguine as a glowing coal.

See, see, my shadow's fled, and leaves me here
Alone in this red sunshine. I will play
Sweet lute-songs to recall it ; it lurks near.

What, thou, my leech ? How fares my leech to-day ?
What if I had thee crucified ev'n ere
That blood-red pill, the sun, has rolled away ?

QUEEN ELEANOR TO ROSAMOND CLIFFORD.

(1160.)

THOU trembling lamb, round whom I move and
move

In ever smaller circles day by day,
Watching thy every motion : let none say
I love thee not,—more than my heaven above !

Oh, there is nothing like the panting love
With which the tigress closes round her prey !

Men call it hate ; I call it love at play ;
The yearning of the viper for the dove.

When thou art dead, I'll come, be not afraid,
And feel the softness of thy braids of gold,
The roundness of thy throat that so sweet sang ;

And I shall feel, when once my hand is laid
Upon thy breast, and finds it clammy cold,
Each nail become a claw, each tooth a fang.

BLONDEL TO RICHARD CŒUR DE LION.

(1194.)

I ASK the woods and waters where thou art ;
And oft it seems as if the fir and beech
Tried, in their unintelligible speech,
To tell the secret they would fain impart.
Against what bars swells up thy lion's heart,
I ask of the deep Danube, and of each
Swift stream it gathers ; but their answers reach
My dull brain not : and on they roll and dart.
The world forsakes thee, Richard, O my king ;
But he who loves thee, he who strives to find
Where thou art dungeoned, he can only sing :
And so I mix my singing with the wind,
Which round each castle's bars is uttering
Its story to the wretch who sits behind.

TANNHÄUSER TO VENUS.

(1207.)

O H, thou art fairer than the deadly Nix,
To whom the fisher of the tarn doth list ;
Thy fooling voice is harder to resist
Than that which lures where Loreley's eddy licks ;
Thy eyes outdance the dancing light that tricks
The traveller astray in the marsh mist ;
Thy lips are sweeter than the lips that kissed
Sir Guntran where the haunted rivers mix.
And though there be more peril in the deep
Of thy green eyes than in the lonely tarn,
In thy embrace than that of whirling Rhine,
Into thy bright damnation will I leap,
Though Mary Mother's self should shriek to warn ;
Dame Venus, I am thine, and thou art mine.

VENUS TO TANNHÄUSER.

(1207.)

THOU art the sunshine of the woods of fir ;
Thou art the loud brook's song, the wild bee's
hum ;

Thou art the fragrance of the trickling gum
That scents the morning like a mountain myrrh.

Thy strength is like the snow's when Spring's feet stir
Its beetling loads, that down with thunder come.

Thy voice is like the call that wakes things numb
When April fills the woods with insect whir.

Adonis was the panting southern wave,

The lazy lapping brightness at my feet ;
The lemon-laden breath that Greek isles gave ;

But thou, strong breeze, ineffably more sweet,

Pungent with scents that northern forests have,
Thou in my heart hast hurled him from his seat.

EZZELIN TO LUCIFER.

(1250.)

THE wolves were yelping round the castle tower ;
The witches croaked a baleful bridal hymn ;
The marsh lights danced all round the black
moat's rim,

Where swam the moonlit snakes at spellful hour ;

Like a hot whirlwind to my mother's bower,

Then, Fiend, thou camest—scorching breast and
limb

With sulph'rous kisses—till the stars grew dim
And hungry Day did the thin moon devour.

O Lucifer, O Father, have I done

Enough in thy dread service ? Art thou pleased,
O pain-inflictor, with thy Paduan son ?

Have I not turned my cities into hells ?

Foreburnt thy damned, innumerable teased
Men's feet with fire, and filled the world with yells ?

FARINATA DEGLI UBERTI TO CONQUERED
FLORENCE.

(1260.)

NOW shall the ploughshare over thee be passed,
And wiped away each crowded square and
street ;

And seed shall sprinkle thee, and wholesome wheat
Replace thy crops of human hate at last ;

And, through the empty valley where thou wast,
Arno shall seek thee wondering, and repeat
To land and sea the news that on the seat
Of stately Florence cornfields ripen fast !

And yet, thou evil city, I was born
Within thee, and I hesitating stand :
Enough that I should scorch thee with my scorn :

Live on, thou nest of scorpions ! Not my hand
Shall pull thee down to sow the yellow corn.
Live, and repent thee—spared at my command.

DONNA BELLA TO DANTE.

(1265.)

THE day I gave thee birth I had a dream :
I thought an eagle held me high above
The countless souls that Mercy thinks not of,
As in the bottomless abyss they teem.

I saw them vaguely by a lurid gleam :
A very sea of shapes, that God's breath drove
Into great waves of pain, and whence there strove
A roar that heightened to a tempest's scream.

Then upward through the rainbow to the skies
My eagle soared with me still in his hold,
To where God's very glory blinds the eyes,
Alighting on the battlements of gold,
Whence the ineffable hosannas rise ;
I heard them still when thou wert one hour old.

FRANCESCA DA RIMINI TO PAULO
MALATESTA.

(1270.)

UPON the bough of life I sat and sang,
And thou didst seek me on the morning's breath.
If Love should lead us to a common death,
The kiss that made us one was worth the pang.
Upon a single thread our two lives hang ;
Peril, on earth, surrounds us like a wreath ;
God frowns above, fiends mutter underneath ;
We go where word of mercy never rang.
Rather than part, O love, I would accept
To share with thee the pauseless gust of Hell,
Like storm-borne birds for ever onward swept,
Where subterranean hurricanes compel
The wind-imprisoned spirits that are kept
Upon the wing in Nature's cavernous shell.

PIA DEI TOLOMEI TO LOVE AND DEATH.

(1295.)

THE distant hills are blue as lips of death ;
Between myself and them the hot swamps
steam

In fetid curls, which, in the twilight, seem
Like gathering phantoms waiting for my breath ;
While in the August heat with chattering teeth
I sit, and icy limbs, and let the stream
Of recollection flow in a dull dream ;
Or weave, with marish blooms, my own death-wreath.

O Love that hast undone me, and through whom
I waste in this Maremma : King of Sighs,
Behold thy handmaid in her heavy doom !
Send me thy brother Death who so oft flies
Across these marshes in the semi-gloom,
To bear me to thy amber-tinted skies.

JACQUES DE MOLAY TO THE DEAD TEMPLARS.

(1314.)

NOW rise and save your brothers in their need,
Ye Templars, from each tomb in which you
sleep,

Muster in ghostly troops when dusk shades creep,
Whate'er your land, with shadowy lance and steed ;

And haste, as when at Askalon, your speed
Outstripped the whirling sand ; and on the deep
Off Tyre and Rhodes, let phantom galleys sweep
In gathering fleets as thick as sower's seed !

For if the dead rise not to save the quick,
There is no help between the earth and sky
For those whom God and man alike forsake :

The red and yellow flames already lick
Our very feet ; and will ye let us die ?
Ye Templars in your tombs, awake, awake !

RIENZI TO THE SHE-WOLF OF ROME.

(1320.)

AMONG the shattered columns where I prowled,
Beneath the self-same stars that saw the rise
Of this dead Rome, I hear, mid the wind's
sighs,

Thou iron-dugg'd nurse, the phantom of thy howl ;

And, shuddering, I draw my scholar's cowl

Closer about me, while, before my eyes,

Half shadowy lictors, in their panoplies,

There where I know that there is but the owl.

Call'st thou thy cub ? Here, Foster-Mother, here !

Where heavy brambles and the tufted grass

Invade the crumbling arches, tier by tier ;

Where once the hundred-thousand-headed mass

Pressed forward with a heaven-rending cheer

To see a Scipio and his captives pass !

LAURA TO PETRARCH.

(1345.)

SWEET Florentine that sitteth by the hearth
When hums my spinning, and the shadows leap
As leaps the fire and with its stealthy creep,

The winter twilight hushes all the earth :

A husband's love besunning my life's girth,
Warms me like grain that ripens for the reap ;
And children, my life's jewels, stand and peep
Behind my chair, and leave my heart no dearth.

But who would scorn to add another hour
To glorious summer's ampleness, or scorn
Bright gems of thought, though sparkling be her
dower ?

So let thy fondness warm me and adorn,
Sweet Florentine, though Love already shower
Its ripening rays like sunshine on the corn.

PETER OF PORTUGAL TO INEZ DE CASTRO.

(1356.)

O INEZ, canst thou hear from underground,
Sweet bride of nard and myrrh, the loud bells
ring ?

Wilt thou not be my Queen, now I am King,
And leave thy vault, embalmed one, to be crowned ?

Oh, leave me not alone, when all around
Are full of mirth, and I the sole sad thing.

Arise, arise, dead flower : it is Spring ;
Oh, let Death's frost, with Winter's, be unbound !

In coronation robes shalt thou be dressed,
And on the rippling gold that was thy hair
A royal circlet's meaner gold shall rest.

The gems thy eyes outshone, thou now shalt wear
In royal pomp upon thy throbless breast,
Where they may blaze, undimmed by thy dim star.

JEANNE DE BOURGES TO HER MASTER.

(1370.)

O THOU to whom, upon the mangy heath,
 Beneath the leprous moon the obscene cries
 And crazy laughter of despair uprise,
And hymns of hate, forced through men's tight-clenched
 teeth ;

Thou who hast taught me to outspeed the breath
 Of tempests as the living broomstick flies ;
 To steal the bells of steeples from the skies,
And drop them in the sleeping fields beneath—

Reveal thyself, as in a mirror dim,
 Where seethe the oils distilled from dead men's fat,
Which here with muttered spells I sit and skim ;

Or come, as once at dusk, in shape of bat
 To scorch, unseen, with kisses every limb,
And leave me, at the dawn, in shape of rat.

THE KING OF CYPRUS TO HIS QUEEN.

(1399.)

THY beauty has swooped down upon my soul ;
Thou hast me in the talons of thy love,
And hold'st me in the dizziness above,
High o'er the cloud, high o'er the thunder's roll.
The world is like the hillock of a mole,
Scarce visible, where others breathe and move..
Alone in the great sky through which we clove,
We seem to be the universal whole.
Night closes round. The burning stars flame out,
Intolerably many, and yet more ;
And crimson meteors whirl in ceaseless rout ;
I see the earth no longer as we soar—
New moons, new suns, surround us all about,
As still we rise ; and, blinded, I adore.

THE DUKE OF MILAN TO SHADOWS AND
SOUNDS.

(1430.)

WHO wraps me in a clammy cloak of fear?
The air seems full of throttling hands that float
Invisible, and play about my throat,
While unseen daggers tickle, ever near.

Shade teems with eyes, while close to me I hear
A constant stealthy step; and spite the coat
Of mail beneath my shirt, spite walls and moat,
I quail as every rustle meets my ear.

O thrice curst need of food! I force my teeth
To chew, my throat to swallow. Is there not
In every dish the tasteless spice of death?

Spare me, ye shapes, that crouch in each dark spot;
Move not, ye curtains, with the summer's breath;
Your ceaseless rustlings make my live blood clot.

A VOICE TO CHARLES VII.

(1431.)

A STONE is in thy bosom, not a heart ;
Water is in thy veins instead of blood :
Or art thou some stiff painted king of wood,
Heartless and tongueless, sitting there apart,
While she who crowned and made thee what thou art,
Who even like God's warlike angel stood
To guard thee in her steel-clad maidenhood,
Rolls to the stake upon the English cart ?
And fear'st thou not lest every tongue of flame
Which round her martyr limbs shall play and ply
Here upon earth, where she to save thee came,
Should breed for thee in hell, when thou shalt die,
Flames which should hold thee in their restless game,
Like multiplying snakes, eternally ?

CARMAGNOLA TO THE REPUBLIC OF VENICE.

(1432.)

I HEAR my death-bell tolling in the square ;
And I am ready, ye Venetian Ten !
But God at times reveals to dying men
The Future's depths, and what the years prepare :
And, through Time's veil, I see, as through thick air,
A day of doom beyond your finite ken,
When this strong Venice—old and feeble then—
In vain, like me, shall call on men to spare.
The day shall come when she shall drink of gall,
And when the same blind fear that makes you take
My life to-day, shall consummate her fall ;
When she shall take the noise her own troops make
For the strong foe, and, in this very hall,
In her wild fear, her old sea-sceptre break.

JULIAN MALASPADA TO THE FALSE HIPPOLYTUS.

(1450.)

THOU living Riddle, art thou he or not ?
Thou art his image, such as it might be
Within the looking-glass ; and if not he,
Who else, who else, thou breathing walking plot ?
And yet why seek ? The golden coin I got
For one I lost, is worth as much to me
If it be stamped alike, and if I see
No difference even in the smallest dot.
Ay, but if underneath that semblance lies
A base and stinking metal ? If the mould
Be self-same, but the coin no longer buys ?
What if the fair appearance I behold
Were lined with murder ? Something in his eyes,
When I would probe them, makes my blood run cold.

ELEANOR BRACKEN TO MARGARET GREY.

(1460.)

MAY every little shining pin I drive
 Into thy waxen image make thee yell
 As in the endless echoing vaults of Hell
Men yell unheard,—yet leave thee still alive,
That I may linger out to four or five
 My gloating weeks of vengeance, through this spell;
 For now my heart has filled its every cell
With hatred's honey like a swarming hive.
I'll make thy vaunted beauty shrink and wane
 More fast than dawn can make the thin moon fade,
And shrivel thee upon thy bed of pain :
Thy blood is liquid fire, for I have made
 A very Phlegethon of thy every vein :
Is not thy breast my pincushion, thou jade ?

LEONARDO DA VINCI ON HIS SNAKES.

(1480.)

I LOVE to watch them, trickling on the floor,
Like Evil's very oozings running free ;
Now livid blue, now green as green can be,
Now almost white, though black an hour before.

Their undulation, trammelled by no shore,
Might be a ripple upon Horror's Sea ;
The live meander moves so soundlessly—
Inscrutable as magic's very core.

What if I painted a Medusa's head,
Fresh severed, lying on its back, with brow
Convulsed in death, and wan as moonlit lead ;
And made the snakes, still writhing in a slow
Death-struggle, round the temples that are dead,
Striving to quit them in a ceaseless flow ?

LA BALUE TO LOUIS XI.

(1480.)

A T last have mercy : let me out at last :
This iron cage has warped my very bones.
Have mercy, by the smile thy little ones
First gave thee ! Spare me by the hope thou hast
That Christ will save thee. Have not ten years passed ?
Hast thou not made of me a beast that moans,
Howls on all-fours ? Relent : the throne of thrones
Looks down on thine ; thy life like mine ebbs fast.
No, no, I'll curse thee blind ; I'll curse thee black
Of the black death ; and, hurling hope away,
I'll pray to God to make me of the pack
Which, in the plains of Hell, by night and day
Shall yell for ever louder on thy track
And rend an ever-renovated prey !

LORENZO DE MEDICIS TO HIS LAST AUTUMN.

(1491.)

NOW falls the autumn in a rain of gold
And makes a very Danaë of Earth,
Whose breast, beneath the yellow leaves, gives
birth

To scented sighs as hers 'neath Jove of old.

And golden vapour fills each mountain fold,
And warmth and ripeness fill the broad land's girth,
Ere old November cower by the hearth
To warm his hands that tremble with the cold.

But I, whose autumn cometh premature,
From these Careggi windows mutely gaze
On yonder towered Florence through the pure

October air, just tinged with golden haze ;
And see alone the tomb, where, cold and sure,
Eternal Winter waits me some few days.

LOUIS DE LIGNY TO LEONORA ALTAMURA.

(1495.)

THE amber battlements of castled cloud ;
The phantom isles that fool a ship at sea ;
The congregated minarets that flee
And cheat the caravan's worn thirsty crowd ;
All those lost towns which fishermen have vowed
They saw in lakes whose fathoms countless be,
While from the depths there rose up solemnly
A sound of bells, as on their oars they bowed :
There will we live together, thou and I ;
Fit dwelling for such happiness as ours,
Which lasts but for a moment and must die ;
Our palace with its evanescent towers
Melts back into the waters on the sky
As quickly as a dream that Dawn devours.

ALEXANDER VI. TO CESAR BORGIA.

(1497.)

O H that the world, like a Venetian cup
Of bubble glass, when poison enters it,
Had, at thy birth, hissed suddenly and split
And in a thousand fragments splintered up !
Thou call'st me Sire, thou single-headed pup
Of Cerberus, that hast thy brother bit
Dead in his sleep : take what is next most fit ;
Take my own self, and off thy father sup !
Was it to see you on each other prey,
Whelps, that I've planned your greatness all these
years,
And sown the yellow powder on my way ?
What sin have I committed, that my tears,
O Christ, should fall so heavily to-day
On this my son, who now nor sees nor hears ?

RABBI NISSIM TO THE GOD OF FLOODS.

(1497.)

ONCE, in Earth's youth, Thy wrath, O God, struck
man :

In countless shoals were heaped the floating
dead ;

While through the fog the sun's huge eye of lead
Loomed lidless, rayless, like a moon more wan,

And each attracting each, as dead drift can,

Drowned nations met, upon that livid bed,

Till all the million carrion fish had fed
Their fill at last, and Horror's ebb began.

Thou Lord of Floods, why dost Thou bide Thy time

With this incestuous Rome, where Lust is crowned
And mitred, and unwhisperable Crime ?

Here, here is food, if Thou but look around,

For all the fish that feed on Ocean's slime,
And love the chilly dainties of the drowned.

LODOVICO SFORZA TO BEATRICE D'ESTE.

(1498.)

LOVE, as I sat last night upon my bed,
I felt my heart ache suddenly and grow
Big as the world ; and now the morning glow
Seems blacker than the night, not rosy red ;
And on the stairs I hear a mingled tread
Of many, and a whispering below ;
And somehow in my inmost soul I know
That they are come to tell me thou art dead.
I heard the wind among the withering leaves
Of the tall trees give out a sadder moan
Than when at night some wandering spirit grieves ;
And as I heard, I thought : for her alone
Can be this sigh, which Nature suddenly heaves :
What if her soul to Heaven's gate had flown ?

SAVONAROLA TO HIS FATE.

(1498.)

I DREAMT I drifted on an oarless raft,
And that I knew the stream I was upon
Was whirling on to join the Phlegethon
As straight and certain as a cross-bow shaft ;
And in my agony I sobbed and laughed,
Till, far in front, the fiery river shone
With dancing runs of flame. But on and on,
Until it caught and shrivelled up my craft.
O Florence, Florence, am I on the stream
That leads directly to a fiery death,
And is that flaming river not a dream ?
I see it dance ; I feel its scorching breath ;
The sky is filling with a lurid gleam ;
Too quick, O God, I craved the martyr's wreath.

LUCA SIGNORELLI TO HIS SON.

(1500.)

THEY brought thy body back to me quite dead,
Just as thou hadst been stricken in the brawl.
I let no tear, I let no curses fall,
But signed to them to lay thee on the bed ;
Then, with clenched teeth, I stripped thy clothes soaked
red ;
And taking up my pencil at God's call,
All through the night I drew thy muscles all,
And writhed at every beauty of thy head ;
For I required the glory of thy limbs
To lend it to archangel and to saint,
And of thy brow, for brows with halo rims ;
And thou shalt stand, in groups which I will paint
Upon God's walls, till, like procession hymns
Lost in the distance, ages make them faint.

COLUMBUS TO HIS FETTERS.

(1502.)

YE solemn fetters, that I love to keep,
An iron proof of man's injustice here,
Until such day, as, laid within my bier,
Ye shall surround me in my final sleep :
Each link is the reward they made me reap
For some hard link of thought, for some slow year
Of patient struggle ; what they made me wear
For a new world across the appalling deep.
I feel a pang of pleasure at your sight,
A thrill of that excruciating joy
Which He once felt, beneath the Roman rod,
And keep you now to show how kings requite,
To teach success what woes are its alloy,
And chain me through eternity to God.

ZARA TO HIS LOVE.

(1503.)

I.

THE alchemy of Sunrise makes pure gold
Of all the sullen bars of cloudy lead,
While round the heaven's crucible leaps red
The morning's flame that kindles wood and wold,
Converting all the dew-drops gray and cold
To rubies, on the branches overhead,
And strewing opals on the moss instead
Of the dull beads that from night's robe had rolled.
Such transmutation has thy beauty wrought
On all the baser elements that lay
In the cold twilight of my life and thought;
Whatever in my soul was dull and gray,
Now sparkles like the dew-drops that have caught,
Bead after bead, the sun's first kindling ray.

II.

Now like a silver bubble soars the moon,
And up to heaven's surface works her way,
While all the valley fills with gleaming spray
Before she reaches to her midnight noon ;
And fumes from all the censers of hot June
Rise up from gardens and from fields of hay,
Mute, save where springs of molten silver play,
Or drones a beetle on his wee bassoon.
The placid Empress of the summer night
Pours on each sleeping valley and each hill
The silver froth that tips the shrubs with white ;
And thou, O Empress of my life, dost fill
The furthest valleys of my soul with light ;
While thine is all the incense they distil.

VASCO DE GAMA TO THE SPIRIT OF TEMPESTS.

(1504.)

ALL round about us was a liquid hell ;
In monstrous chains the livid summits ran
Beneath thy breath to crush us ; and where
man

Had never sailed, roared round our tortured shell.

Then on the lurid sky, where rose and fell

The black horizon wave, as night began,

I saw thee loom, immense and vague and wan,

And heard thy voice, that seemed a booming bell :

‘ Back—back !’ thou howl’dst ; ‘ these boundless seas
are mine.

Here is no place for man. Here I alone

Have right to reign. Back, back, while life is thine !’

But I pushed on, and made thy seas my own ;

And by-and-by I saw the tossing link

Of waves subside, to show me India’s throne.

CATHERINE TALBOT TO HER CHILD.

(1510.)

A FACE keeps peeping at me through the pane ;
I know thee ; thou art Madness. Where are
they,

The men with masks, who stole my child away ?
All day, all night, I hunt for it in vain.

I hear all round me, ever and again,
A pattering of little feet at play.

But can see nought. Come child, come child, it's
May ;

We'll dance the Dance of Death o'er hill and plain.

The painted Virgin in the chapel shrine
Has seven daggers sticking in her breast ;
I think there must be seventy in mine.

Oh for an earthquake ! Crimson clouds to west.

The sun's face stoops to drink ; it drinks the brine.
I too drink brine.—Those little feet can't rest.

BALBOA TO THE PACIFIC.*

(1513.)

I SAW thee, like a strip of cloth of gold,
From the hill-crest last eve at set of sun,
Thou new-found ocean, skimmed as yet by none,
Save Indian light canoes ; and I behold
Thy bright waves now, in wreaths of foam unrolled,
Kissing my feet like panting slaves that run,
Eager to lay their treasures one by one
At feet of Spain, whose banner I unfold.
Nereids and mermen, tritons of this sea,
I claim you for Don Ferdinand, and bid
Your scaly legions swear him fealty.
The gold, the pearls, the emeralds that are hid
In all your isles and caves are his ; and he
Alone may force the treasure's crystal lid.

* Keats, in his Sonnet on Chapman's Homer, represents Cortez as the discoverer of the Pacific. This is a mistake. Balboa explored the Isthmus of Darien, and discovered the Pacific more than six years before Cortez left Cuba, and landed in Central America.

DOCTOR FAUSTUS TO HELEN OF TROY.

(1520.)

I.

THOU shinest on me like the single star
That brightens in the pearly purple dusk,
When dreamy eve has scent of forest musk,
And faintly gleams the moon's pale scimitar.

The world's exulting beauties, near and far,
By thee are crones, their cheek a wrinkled husk.

Oh! thou whose breast is flame-lit Libyan tusk,
Whose eyes once kindled heaven-scaling war,

Off with this pedant's robe, this dull base garb,

That I may break a lance against the world,
Thou Queen of Queens of Beauty, in thy name ;

And on a steel-clad steed, a fiery barb,

Win Helen's smile as each proud knight I've hurled
Writhes in his armour in the dust and shame.

II.

At times I think thou art the moon that strays
Across my dusty study at still night,
And makes the phials and retorts gleam bright
As clustered icicles beneath her rays ;
For thou transmutest by thy placid gaze
All dust to dust of diamonds. O thou Light
Of long-dead lands, which, by my magic might,
I have rekindled for my olden days,
Oh ! I will hide thy legion-dooming charms
Deep in this dark old house—lest the Greek dead
Should burst their graves to snatch thee from my arms,
And, by the ghosts of all their captains led,
Should girdle Wittenberg with shadowy swarms
As many as the leaves on Autumn's bed.

PONCE DE LEON TO THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH.

(1520.)

I.

THOU bubbling, rippling diamond that I seek
Among these Indian isles, while heavier grow
Both foot and heart as hope of thee ebbs low,
And as the years add wrinkles to my cheek :

Behold, my back grows bent, my hand grows weak,
And on the shrivelled vellum of my brow
The years have written all the cares they know,
And I am whitening like a wintry peak.

And thou art in existence,—in some isle
Where pebbles of pure gold thy clear depth pave,
Like golden thoughts beneath a dreamer's smile.

Alone some silent Indian stoops to lave
His wrinkles off ; or else, from while to while,
Some wounded panther laps thy healing wave.

II.

FOUNT, shall I never find thee? Must I still
Search isle on isle whilst other men behold
Their baser dreams fulfilled, and clutch the gold,
The sparkling stones, that cure no human ill?

Shall every other Spanish seeker fill
His ship with ingots, plunge in gems untold
His gauntlet elbow high, while I grow old
In searching for the sapphire of thy rill?

Fount, I'll attain thee yet; and by thy brink
I'll kneel, and see my white reflected hair
For the last time, before I drink and drink:

But as I wash the wrinkles and the care
From off my brow, and in thy brightness sink,
What if, made young, I died of rapture there?

CARDINAL WOLSEY TO HIS HOUND.

(1530.)

APPROACH, my hound ; approach and lick my
hand ;

Thou art not human, and thou wilt not bite ;
And still thou fawnest on me in despite
Of frowning courtiers and a king's command.

O hound ! O hound ! if thou couldst understand
How ruined I am, how sorry is my plight,
Thou, too, wouldst turn against me, and delight
To root thy fangs, like all the thankless band.

I might have built my house upon a rock ;
I chose to build it on the sands that slide,
And fill it up with gold until it fell.

Approach and lick my hand, that we may mock
With thy sincerity the tongues that lied,
And with thy love the friends that bite so well.

MICHAEL ANGELO TO HIS STATUE OF DAY.

(1535.)

THOU strong, swift Day, that with a single leap
Dost tip with gold the hundred-humpèd spine
Of this broad rocky Tuscan Apennine,
Then down the blue and misty valleys creep ;
Thou findest Freedom everywhere asleep,
And men as listless as the grunting swine ;
And pourest down the splendour of thy shine
Just as before, though God's own angels weep :
Therefore I give thee neither face nor eyes,
But leave thy head unhewn, until such time
As Freedom burst her slumber and shall rise,
O thou who ripenest the grapes that climb
The roadside trees, and heatest harvest's skies,
That men may feed and wallow in the slime.

SIR THOMAS MORE TO HIS WIFE.

(1535.)

DOUBTLESS I know how pleasant is the blaze,
And love to sit and warm me by the hearth
When every face which most I love on earth
Is seen or hidden, as the shadow plays ;
And well I know how black are wintry ways
When night holds all, with darkness, cold and dearth,
And how we prize the kisses and the mirth,
And how a summoned sitter stays and stays :
But oh, dame Alice, would you keep me here
Beside life's hearth that burns so warm and bright,
When, from without, God's call hath struck mine ear ?
One short sharp pang, one solitary smite
Which ends the warmth will also end the fear.
Now kiss me, for I go into the night.

FILIPPO STROZZI TO DUKE COSMO.

(1538.)

HAST thou not murdered Freedom in her sleep ?
So thou may'st murder me. But, in Death's
sight,

I curse thee, Cosmo, with a shrivelling blight ;
Grain shalt thou sow, and vipers shalt thou reap !

May Horror's silent spirits sit and keep

Thine eyes awake beside thy bed at night ;

Or whirl thy dreams through caverns of such fright,
That thou shalt cower in a clammy heap !

I curse thee from the depths of what I am ;

I curse thy thoughts, thy prayers, thy food, thy
breath ;

And all thy hours I call on God to damn.

Corrupt in life, before thou rot in death ;

And when thou shalt be dying, may God slam
The open gates of Mercy in thy teeth !

LUTHER TO A BLUE-BOTTLE FLY.

(1540.)

AY, buzz and buzz away. Dost thou suppose
I know not who thou art, who all to-day
Hast vexed and plagued me, as I write and pray,
And dared to settle on my very nose ?

Thou thinkest thou canst trip me while I doze ?
Each time I snatch at thee thou slipp'st away ;
But wait till my next sermon : I will lay
Thee in the dust, thou Father of all Foes.

Ay, buzz about my Bible. But I wot,
Unless thou wish to shrivel, thou'lt not dare
To settle on the page, thou live blue blot !

Out, Beelzebub, or thou wilt make me swear.
Buzz back to Hell : old Martin fears thee not,
Thou god of Flies, though thou shouldst fill the air !

CÆSAR GALLETTI TO ARIOSTO.

(1540.)

FRIEND, I am weary of this world of ours,
Where nibbling cares outnumber nibbling mice,
Where all is fleeting as a film of ice,
Where hidden cankers nip the budding flowers,
Where, as years pass, the temper slowly sours,
Where every pleasure hath some pain for spice,
Where happiness is as a cast of dice,
Where creep the sad, and fly the pleasant hours.
Come, spread thy sail, and steer for Fairyland,
To print thy foot on Fancy's golden strand,
For that alone is lasting and is true.
There everything which glitters is of gold,
There nought grows ever chill or ever old,
And all is radiant that we travel through.

BENVENUTO CELLINI TO HIS MISTRESS.

(1545.)

NOW will I make my Perseus—first of wax—
Slim, naked, young, exulting. In his left
He shall hold high thy vipered head fresh cleft,
Whence clotted blood shall pour, as, 'neath the axe,
That girl's last week. His foot upon thy back's
Convulsive writhes shall rest ; while, in his right,
He'll hold a short fantastic falchion tight.
Thy neck shall pour, just like the head it lacks.
Then to his heels and helmet I will tie
Wings that o'er wondrous fairy lands have flown ;
And he shall breathe such triumphs as did I
When my good harquebuss hurled Bourbon down
Rome's wall ; or when I wiped my dagger dry
In my first brawl, and thrilled from toe to crown.

FALLOPIUS TO HIS DISSECTING KNIFE.

(1550.)

NOW shalt thou have thy way, thou little blade,
So bright and keen; now shalt thou have thy
way,

And plod no more through bodies cold as clay,
But through quick flesh, by fiery pulses swayed.

A glorious and munificent duke hath made
Thee a great gift: live convicts; and to-day,
Though Nature shudder, thou shalt say thy say
On Life's deep springs where God so long forbade.

Fear not lest Mercy blunt thy edge, or make
The hand that holds thee o'er the living man
With any human hesitation shake;

But thou shalt tell me why his life-blood ran
Thus in his veins; what Life is; and shalt slake
The thirst of thirsts that makes my cheek so wan.

LADY JANE GREY TO THE FLOWERS AND
BIRDS.

(1553.)

TO-MORROW death : and there are woods hard
by,

With restless spots of sunshine on the ground,
With bees that hum and birds that pipe all round,
And beds of moss where sparkling dewdrops lie ;

To-morrow death ; and there are fields of rye
Where poppies and bright corn-flowers abound ;
And there are fragrant grasses, where the sound
Of streamlets rises, where the mowers ply.

I wonder if the woodland bells will close
A little earlier on the day I end,
Tired of the light, though free from human woes ;

And if the robin and the thrush will wend
A little sooner to their sweet repose,
To make a little mourning for their friend ?

SAINT THERESA TO THE HEAVENLY GATES.

(1555.)

THE glories of the Sunset are as nought
To those of my bare cell, whose walls divide
Like parting clouds, and let my spirit ride
To Heaven's gates of flaming topaz wrought.
In that abyss of glory beyond thought,
Like bubbles winking in a golden tide,
Gleam angel-faces, whirled and multiplied,
That disappear so soon the eye has caught.
Then through the cleft as through the open door
Of some great minster, anthems that are past
All earthly words, in gusts of glory pour
Till, drunk with light and sound, and faint with fast,
The body yields, the spirit soars no more,
And my cell's walls close round again at last.

HANNIBAL PETRONI TO CLAUDIA MALASPADA.

(1559.)

I WOULD that all the sparkling stones that find
Their way to Philip's treasury were mine ;
And all the pearls that nations pay in fine
To some victorious soldan of far Ind.
That I might strew the garden paths that wind
Beneath thy casement with all gems that shine,
Fit gravel for no other feet but thine
This summer night, thou shadow on the blind !
Gems have I none. But see, from heaven's hem
The moon is strewing opals for thy feet,
And turns each vulgar pebble to a gem ;
Come forth, come forth : the night is warm and sweet,
Each flower sleeps upon its silver'd stem,
And all is hushed, save our two hearts that beat.

CHASTELARD TO MARY STUART.

(1563.)

THEN send me to my death. But wilt thou rid
Thy life of me thereby? If in the gloom
Of thy adored and silent balmy room
My ghost should glide, where once I panting hid?
At night thou'lt see me; though thou close thy lid
As tightly as they soldered down my tomb,
And feel a kiss—thou shalt know well of whom—
Scorch thee as living kisses never did.
When thou shalt die, at Heaven's gate I'll sit
And watch the stream of silent souls that wend
Through the great arch, till thou approachest it.
Or if thy doom be flame, I shall descend
Through all the caverns where the lost souls flit,
To find and clasp thee at their endless end.

DON CARLOS TO ELISABETH DE VALOIS.

(1565.)

THY love is like a wondrous western sea,
Wherein I find strange isles, bright Indian lands,
With ruby-rolling streams, auriferous sands,
And sparkling temples built of jewelry ;
And many a shady, incense-bearing tree,
With brighter birds than ours, by cool rill stands ;
And unknown flowers younger from God's hands,
And butterflies, which seem those flowers set free.
A wondrous world, which I have reached alone
At peril of my life ; and whence I bring
Gold ingots, pearls, and every glittering stone.
But in my soul is death with all its sting :
The pain and peril only are my own ;
The ingots and the gems are for the King.

MAXIMILIAN ARNOLFINI TO LUCRETIA
BUONVISI.

(1580.)

I N El Dorado's forests, it is said,
There dwells a monstrous man-devouring flower,
Worshipped as a divinity ; each hour,
From dawn to dusk, with some new victim fed.
Her beauty lures the wretch ; her petals spread
Strange drowsyscents ; sleep grasps him in its power ;
Till iron tendrils, creeping nearer, lower,
Draw him, fast bound, as to a nuptial bed.
Even such art thou. Pale beauty, dost thou think
I know it not, or that I quail beneath
Thy baleful shade, and from thy kisses shrink ?
I caught the fatal incense of thy breath,
And let my head in glorious freedom sink
On thy dread breast, thou worshipped flower of death.

PHILIP THE SECOND TO THE OCEAN WIND.

(1588.)

ONE ceaseless thought keeps rolling in my soul :
Lost, lost ; lost, lost ; the whole great fleet is
lost ;

And all its countless spars are being tost
Where sets the storm-sun like a burning coal.

The very waves turn heretic and roll
Their impious crests against me ; and the host
Which cowed the world, is strewing every coast
With splintered might from Lisbon to the pole.

Thou briny wind, with wreck and horror rife,
Whose sudden breath rebellious to God's will
Has cut my plan in two as with a knife,

Now wrap me round in thy triumphant chill ;
Howl through the ruined towers of my life,
If they can stand a little longer still.

BEATRICE CENCI TO HEAVEN AND EARTH.

(1598.)

NOW pelt in rattling sheaves, thou fiery rain ;
Pour thick thy flakes, thou incandescent ash,
And, like a whirling, never-ceasing lash,
Source, and rescourse this city and its plain !

Or shake Earth's props again, and yet again,
Ye hands of God, until she gape and crash,
And molten lava gurgles up and wash
With fiery waves the unutterable stain !

The guiltless stars above me are too bright :
The guiltless flowers all around distil
Too pure an incense through the summer night ;

The horrible placidities that fill
The earth and sky are mocking, and incite
My thoughts to murder. Everything says : Kill !

THE WANDERING JEW TO DISTANT ROME.

(1600.)

I.

ONCE more, O Rome—once more, Eternal One,
I come to thee, from northmost woods of larch,
Across thy plain, whose grasses rot and parch,
And see thee standing in the setting sun ;

And see, as once, although the ages run,
Thy aqueducts still stretching, arch on arch,
Like files of dusky giants on the march,
'Mid streams which I alone need never shun.

I knew thy face, long ere I might behold,
From this same spot, yon heaven-piercing dome,
Which stands out black against the sky of gold.

As deathless as myself, Eternal Rome,
I see thee changing as the world grows old,
While I, unchanged, still measure plain and foam.

II.

THE dust of countless years weighs down my feet,
Worn out with trudging o'er the bones of those
Whom I saw born, while states and cities rose,
Declined, and vanished, even to their seat.

The generations ripen like the wheat
Which every Spring for Summer's sickle sows ;
While I, sole spared, trudge on without repose
Through empty desert and through crowded street.

The lightning splits the stone upon my path ;
The earthquake passes, with its crazing sound ;
The whirlwind wraps me in its cloak of wrath ;

All Nature spares me, while it girds me round
With every stress and terror that it hath ;
And on I trudge till ages shall be crowned.

III.

AND on and on, through Scythia's whistling waste,
Alone beneath inexorable stars ;
Or, lonelier still, through India's full bazaars,
Pursued by none, yet ever onward chased ;
Or through the wreck of empires long effaced,
Whose pomp I saw, and their triumphal cars ;
Or on the track of Europe's thousand wars
Swept on by routed armies in their haste.
Each path of Earth, my foot, which ne'er may stop,
Treads and retreads, and yet hath but begun
Its lonely journey through the human crop ;
To last till Earth, exhausted, shall have spun
Her meted spin, and, like a wavering top,
Shall lurch her last, and Time shall eat the Sun.

HANS BROMIUS TO HIMSELF.

(1602.)

HAVE I not sat for years upon this bench,
And doomed, unmoved, to gibbet or to stake
Whole scores of years, and never let them
shake

My wall of law, or pass my heart's deep trench ?

What is it, in this pallid little wench—

So slight and frail, that flame will scarcely make
One mouthful of her—that doth almost wake
Compassion—almost give my heart a wrench ?

Yet can I doubt ? She hunts for rare wood-flowers ;

She strolls alone beneath the starry sky ;
She sobs without a cause ; she swoons for hours ;

A causeless fever glistens in her eye :

Flame must expel the devil that devours
Her blood, and mercy must repress its cry.

SIR WALTER RALEIGH TO A CAGED LINNET.

(1608.)

THOU tiny solace of these prison days,
Too long already have I kept thee here ;
With every week thou hast become more dear—
So dear that I will free thee : fly thy way.

Man, the alternate slave and tyrant, lays
Too soon on others what he hath to bear.
Thy cage is in my cage ; but, never fear,
The sun once more shall bathe thee with its rays.

Fly forth, and tell the sunny woods how oft
I think of them, and stretch my limbs in thought
Upon their fragrant mosses green and soft ;
And whistle all the whistlings God hath taught
Thy throat, to other songsters high aloft—
Not to a captive who can answer nought.

DOMINGO LOPEZ TO HIS SAVIOUR.

(1610.)

THE cowardice of man who dares not do!—
For sixteen centuries since Jesus died
On Golgotha, we paint Him from dolls tied
On crosses, or from corpses stark and blue.
Has any painter ever dared to screw
A living model to the Cross, or tried
To seize the wriggles of the Crucified—
The twitches of the living hands nailed through?
O Christ, my Christ, Thou shalt be painted yet
In all Thy torture; and at last men's eyes
Shall see Thy cracking limbs, Thy crimson sweat!
I've trapped a Jew in cellars whence can rise
No yells. I'll work at leisure; and we'll set
The finished picture in St. Barnaby's.

F

65

ARABELLA STUART TO THE UNSEEN SPRING.

(1612.)

IT must be Spring ; a long bright slanting ray
Peeps daily in and warms my prison now ;
While, through the bars, on which I rest my
brow,

A twittering of swallows finds it way.

The world must now be full of thorny may ;
Bright speckled butterflies ; young leaves that glow ;
Ripe fragrant grass ; fresh banks where wild bells
grow ;

Bleatings and whistlings, cuckoo notes all day.

Thou peeping ray of Spring, go kiss the corn
That sprouts beneath the breeze, and never pry
Into this cell, where Misery pines forlorn ;

Ye happy, happy swallows, that can fly
On Spring's own breath, oh, twitter not such scorn
Of earth, of woe, and of captivity !

A MAY-FLOWER PILGRIM TO THE FADING
CLIFFS.

(1620.)

F ADE, fade, ye cliffs ; fade, England, from our lives
As twilight closeth on the vessel's path :
The ocean's rage is kinder than man's wrath :
Our tears are salter than the spray that drives,
And fast they fall. Farewell, ye human hives ;
Ye village bells, and fragrant meadow math ;
On, on, towards the wilderness that hath
Freedom, scant food, and winds that cut like knives.
For Lord, oh, Thou art with us ; and Thy breath
Will blow us to a haven, as it blew
The captains of the Spaniard to their death.
From Thee we have the impulse and the clue ;
And chains of liquid peaks will sink beneath
Thy smoothing hand, though shrieks the ocean mew.

THE DUCHESS SALVIATI TO CATERINA
CANACCI.

(1628.)

AND so his Grace my husband loves to pass
Hours at thy feet ; and when thy hair's unrolled,
He dips his fingers in the brook of gold
Which trickles down thy shoulders, my sweet lass ?
He loves no more the blue-black ebon mass
Of mine, and thinks my olive cheek grown old ;
Nor praises now my teeth, which I am told
Are whiter than the viper's in the grass.
Minion, I have a whim for golden thread :
Wilt give me one gold lock with which to play,
As I sit lonely here upon my bed ?
But ere that golden lock be cut away
Methinks I'll ask thee also for thy head,
And give my knaves a task to do to-day.

TILLY TO SPIRITS OF CARNAGE.

(1631.)

YE Spirits of Destruction, that have flocked
From every quarter of the lurid sky,
To see the flames of Magdeburg outvie
Each other's rage, till Hell's own glare was mocked :
Join in my train, as through these gates that locked
God's vengeance out, I ride exultingly,
And goad my steed through embers fetlock high,
And thicker death than had an earthquake rocked !
Rise up, thou roar of slaughter and despair ;
Rise up, thou smoke, in curls of tawny gray ;
Rise up, thou scent of death, and fill the air ;
Rise to God's ears and nostrils all to-day ;
And rise again wherever man shall dare
To split Christ's Church in two, or shake her sway !

LYCIDAS TO MILTON.

(1637.)

THE flowers that we lay upon a tomb
Are withered by the morrow,—ere the crowd
Which for a moment ceased its hum, and bowed
Its head, as Death flew by and made a gloom,
Resumes its whirl. And scarcely longer bloom
The sculptured wreaths with which a tomb more
proud,
In some pale minster, may have been endowed ;
For marble petals share the common doom.
But thou canst twine the wreaths that never die ;
And something tells me thou wilt stay behind
When I am gone ; I know it, I know not why.
The sea-gull's scream, the wailing of the wind,
The ocean's roar, sound like Death's prophecy :
I fain would have a garland thou hadst twined.

GALILEO TO THE EARTH.

(1638.)

AND yet it moves, it spins, through night and day,
With dumb terrific speed; and town and
throng,

Mountain and tossing sea, are whirled along,
And not one drop is lost upon the way.

On Heaven's dustless paths the Lord can play
With heavier balls than ours; there among
Unnumbered spheres that never can go wrong,
He's hurled us on our course and we obey.

O Earth, I feel thee quiver under foot;
I feel the whizzing of thy ceaseless flight,
As other whirling planets past us shoot;

I feel thee bounding like a ship at night
Through unseen waves. To guide us, God has put
On every skyey coast a starry light.

MASANIELLO TO THE DUKE OF ARCOS.

(1647.)

K NOWST thou yon dark Vesuvius? Hast thou
heard

The growl of its unfathomable mines
Of creeping fire, long ere the red wrath shines,
And seen the birds take flight though nought has stirred?

And when the lava, boiling o'er, has neared,
Hast seen how it has swallowed up the vines,
And how the cabins and the lofty pines
Have flared with crackling sound, and disappeared?

So here at Naples thou canst hear, beneath
The pillars of thy rule, a growling sound—
Innumerable mutterings of men.

Upon the surface rustles not a breath;
But by-and-by, the trusty solid ground
Will quake and yawn, though none can tell thee when.

ISAAC WALTON TO RIVER AND BROOK.

(1650.)

WHICH is more sweet,—the slow mysterious
stream,
Where sleeps the pike throughout the long
noon hours,
Which moats with emerald old cathedral
towers,
And winds through tufted timber like the dream
That glides through summer sleep;—where white
swans teem,
And dragonflies and broad-leaved floating flowers,
Where through the hanging boughs you see the
mowers
Among the grasses, whet their scythes that gleam ;
Or that blue brook where leaps the speckled trout,
That laughs and sings and dances on its way
Among a thousand bafflings in and out ;
Bubbling and gurgling through the livelong day
Between the stones, in riot, reel, and rout,
While rays of sun make rainbows in the spray ?

PHILIP IV. TO HIS BARBER.

(1660.)

I 'LL tell thee, if thou carest, what's a king :
A creature all men feed on,—sucked, and bled ;
A carcass in the leech-pond, not yet dead ;
Whose shape you scarce can see, so close they cling.
Sunk to the throat in forms ; as cramped a thing
As is the Turkish felon, who is said
To be interred alive, all save the head,
For passing dogs to sniff at, wondering.
In life he bears the weight of pomp and fear,
Of all the instincts that he has repressed,
Of all the fictions that he has to wear ;
In death no sun nor blade of grass may rest
Upon the horror of his triple bier,
But some dark minster weighs upon his chest.

MADAME DE BRINVILLIERS TO HER ART.

(1675.)

SOME love to look into their lover's eyes,
And some to watch a baby in its sleep,
And some to count the jewels that they keep,
And some to watch the fading summer skies ;

But I prefer to watch the numbness rise
To my prey's heart, and slowly make death creep
Through unsuspecting veins ; or watch the deep
Blue eye-rims grow, till cold and stark he lies.

There is no art like that of taking life :

A pinch of dust, three little measured drops,
Can end great wars or plunge mankind in strife.

The weakest hand can shake the world's great props,
Cut through the plans of men with shadowy knife,
And, unsuspected, thin the human crops.

JEWELLER CARDILLAC TO HIS RUBIES.

(1680.)

A T last I have them back, and feast my gaze.
They gleam more crimson for the blood
they've cost,

And sparkle like the murder-reddened frost,
As every little facet winks and plays.

True, I did sell them,—but within three days
I've made them trickle back—the loved, the lost—
From off a dagger's point: and one more ghost
Now lives in ghost-land. Mine are rapid ways.

Who forced the fool to buy them? Did he think
A man can work for years at stones like these,
Then sell them and forget them? That the chink
Of his base gold could silence and appease

The lapidary's love? I crouch and drink
Their colour like red wine . . . with blood for lees.

BIJOU THE DWARF TO THE ELECTRESS MARY.

(1690.)

I AM the imp of stone that squats and leers
Upon the black cathedral front, up high;
With which they fright the children when they
cry,

All warped and hunchbacked, with the great bat's
ears,

And thou the beautiful straight queen that wears
The heavenly smile, while round her comes to die
The yellow sunshine that clings lovingly
To the old statues in their rigid tiers.

I love thee; but thou canst not love me back:
Thine eyes are turned elsewhere and see me not,
Deep in the shadow, lonely, chill, and black.

Thou, bathed in sunshine, love a crooked blot?
Nature would shriek; the earth would quake and
crack;

And I should loathe thee as I loathe my lot.

CHARLES II. OF SPAIN TO APPROACHING DEATH.

(1700.)

MAKE way, my lords ! for Death now once again
Waits on the palace stairs. He comes to lay
His finger on my brow. Make way ! make
way !

Ye whispering groups that scent an ending reign.

Death, if I make thee a grandee of Spain,
And give thee half my subjects, wilt thou stay
Behind the door a little, while I play
With life a moment longer ? I would fain.

Oh, who shall turn the fatal shadow back
On Ahazz' sundial now ? Who'll cure the king
When Death awaits him, motionless and black ?

Upon the wall the inexorable thing
Creeps on and on, with horror in its track.
The king is dying. Bid the great bells ring.

CAPTAIN KIDD TO HIS GOLD.

(1701.)

MY buried treasure leaves me never free :
Last night I dreamt that all my gold was tied
About my neck, and ten times multiplied
To sink me through a bottomless dim sea.

And as I sank, as straight as straight can be,
The drowned and swollen crews from every side,
Livid as lead, swam up to me and tried
To clutch and bite, and cried, ' It's he ! it's he !'

Compared with that unutterable fright
Eternal hunger would appear a boon,
In caves with all my gold to left and right ;

Or else to flit beneath the mottled moon
Among these islands, 'mid the birds of night,
Till men, at last, dig up my last doubloon.

ALEXANDER SELKIRK TO HIS SHADOW.

(1708.)

I.

THIS solitary Eden is a hell.

Let's say I am the first of human race
Upon a new-born world, alone with space,
And watching thee, my shadow, shrink and swell ;
Or man's last vestige, left behind to dwell
On earth's last steep unflooded resting-place,
To tell the wind, which whistles past my face,
Man's ended tale,—my voice, his parting knell.
My shadow, truly thou art very kind
To keep me company ! Ye cockatoos,
Why stay ye here ? I still should have the wind.
I see it rustling 'mid the light bamboos,
As evening neareth. Lidless, bloodshot, blind,
The sun's huge eyeball dips, and slumber woos.

II.

EACH day the doubt that nestles in my soul
Now takes a firmer hold. What if this lone
And horror-haunted ocean-circled stone
Were, with myself, the universe—the whole ?
What if the world, its cities, and man's shoal
Were but my own vain dream, and every one
Of what I deem my memories of years gone
A picture which my fevered nights unroll ?
The weight of all these burning stars o'erhead,
All staring down upon one single man,
Will squeeze out reason, if it hath not fled
Already ; and, as only doomed minds can,
I watch the words, which, lest my tongue grow dead,
I utter to this sea, unsailed and wan.

STRADIVARIUS TO AN UNFINISHED VIOLIN.

(1710.)

THE roar and gurgle of the ocean cave
Are in thy fibres, and the sob of man,
And moans that through a haunted cloister ran,
And every murmur that the beech-woods have.
Ay, and the wild bee's hum, where red pines wave ;
The carol of the gipsy caravan ;
The song that's uttered by the dying swan ;
The warning growl that brooding Etna gave.
All this is in thy fibres—Ay, and more,
If men but care to have it, and set free
The quivering soul that only waits to soar.
Thy voice shall be as thrilling as the plea
Of caverned spirits, gathering to implore
The gloomy Powers of Eternity.

DANIEL FORD ON SUICIDE.

(1740.)

I GOAD self fiercely on the edge of space
With savage rowel, like a quaking steed
Which will not leap, though fast its ploughed flanks
bleed,
But shrinks and rears, and trembles on one place ;
For in that gulf where I would end the race
Resides the ghost of every guilty deed,
And every terror in the human creed,
And every doubt with white and tortured face.
Leap, and fall shattered in another world ?
Leap, and be caught half-way by black-winged ghouls ?
Leap, and go headlong for Eternity,
Through empty Nature's horror, where the hurled,
Like drops of torment in a rain of souls,
Are swept across the everlasting sky ?

LATUDE TO HIS RATS.

(1750.)

I.

I 'VE found a bit of stick, and made a flute ;
My prison rats, what shall I pipe you now ?
Oh, shall I pipe to you of streams that flow
Through tangled grass where swallows whirl and shoot ;
Or of the mossy carpets at the root
Of forest trees, with branches waving low ;
Or of autumnal orchards, all aglow
With mellow sunshine and with reddened fruit ?
Or shall I pipe to you how kind is man,
Here on this earth, where no despair endures,
Where sound no sobs, where teardrops never ran ;
Where none pray daily for the death that cures ;
Where tyranny ne'er reigned, since things began ;
Where gnaws not woe, with sharper teeth than yours ?

II.

Am I a corpse ? a plant ? a shape of clay ?
Or flows there still a dull and sluggish stream
Through my numb body, while the cruel dream
That I was once a man fades slow away ?
And am I thinking ? or has mind to-day
Unlearnt to think, here in this cell where seem
To be nor years nor hours, and where the gleam
Of heaven shows me but my rats at play ?
Am I myself a rat ? I gnaw my slice
Of bread with a rat's teeth. There are no things
Beyond this cell. Naught is, save rats and mice.
Space is a stifling cell ; Time has nor feet nor wings :
Is't God or man who holds me in this vice ?
My jug is empty. Cease, ye mutterings.

JAMES WATT TO THE SPIRIT OF HIS KETTLE.

(1765.)

I SIT beside the hearth, and, for an hour,
I watch the steam that shakes the kettle's lid,
Like some live thing that struggles hard to rid
Its limbs of bondage, and assert its power.

Yea, like some fiend that Solomon made cower,
And who, for countless centuries was bid
Dwell in a bottle which the deep sea hid,
Where, tight compressed, it panted still to tower :

What if this vapour were a stronger thing
Than all the genii cast into the sea
And curst for ever by the Wizard King ?

And what if I one day should set it free,
And break the seal of Solomon's own ring,
And make the Daemon do my drudgery ?

CHARLES EDWARD TO HIS LAST FRIEND.

(1777.)

THOU bottle, thou last comrade that is worth
My love, thou sole Prime Minister I have,
Thou art the last adherent who can save
Thy master still some woe in his heart's dearth.

The table thou art on is my realm's girth,
Instead of that broad England which God gave ;
And with thy help I shuffle to the grave,
Besotten, gouty, left by all on earth.

Hark, hark ! I hear above the trees that sigh
A sound of Highland music wild and sweet,
Like gusts from Falkirk, gusts of victory !

My heart contracts and doubles in its beat ;
I shiver in the sun I know not why :
'Twas but the Roman pipers in the street.

DENIS BROWNE TO MARY HOLT.

(1780.)

NOW Winter traverses the woodlands, love,
And strews his crimson berries on the snow;
The dormouse sleeps, and every wind-puff now
Gives, as it goes, the dying year a shove.

And now no longer coos the forest dove
Upon her nest of sticks, where sweet nuts grow;
And spots of sunshine on the moss below
No longer dance, as dance the leaves above.

For Time has laid a tremble on my hand,
And strewn his sifted snow upon my head;
And lo! my back has bent at his command;

And thou that wast the sunshine, thou art dead—
Dead years ago, beneath his wintry wand—
Dead as the rustling leaves on which I tread.

ROZIER THE AERONAUT TO BENJAMIN
FRANKLIN.

(1785.)

THE storms were weaving. In the cloudy loom
The dazzling shuttle of the lightning ran
Incessant to and fro, and quaking man
Dared breathe but in the intervals of gloom ;
And thou, all fearless of the Titan's doom,
Didst snatch that lightning as its race began,
And tame the thunderbolt, and make the wan
Gray clouds of tempest hush their crash and boom.
But I'll do more ; and, through those clouds thick
curled
I'll soar the heavens in a car of flame,
And make a very footstool of the world.
Undaunted, though my fate should be the same
As Phaeton's, from Heaven's apex hurled
Into the sea, by steeds I cannot tame.

CAZOTTE TO A SUPPER-PARTY.

(1788.)

THE coming Revolution ? One and all,
I say you'll live to see it—and to die.
I see its red Aurora in the sky,
Gorgeous with blood ; for all your heads shall fall.
Fair Duchess, flippant Marquess, you shall call
In vain for mercy.—You, gay sir, shall lie
Gagged in the cart.—The headsman shall untie,
Lady, those pearls, and make your head a ball.
And you, and you, and you. And as for me,
The Seer of Death, my end shall be the same ;
Like him who on the wall thrice cried aloud.
' Woe, woe, Jerusalem ! woe, woe to thee !'
And fell headlong ; while, wrapt in blood and flame,
The city died, and all its desperate crowd.

LOUIS XVI. TO CHARLES I.

(1793.)

THE story of thy death is on my lap,
While o'er my head, not thine, the axe hangs
now ;
And the anguish that once cloaked thee here
below
Now folds me in its black and icy wrap :
But never didst thou feel the mob's red cap
Burn like a red-hot iron on thy brow :
Lend me thy strength to bear the last sharp blow ;
Lead me, O brother, through the narrow gap.
And yet, why quake? Is not the axe they hold
Above me, the portcullis of the sky ?
Beyond it all is amber, rose and gold.
O brother, brother, teach me how to die ;
For thou wilt be, so soon my head has rolled,
The first to greet me in eternity.

GASPARD DUCHATEL TO THE CONVENTION.

(1793.)

SEE, here I am. I leave my dying bed
To give my vote, if I be still in time,
O ye who now are dooming one whose crime
Is only that a crown was on his head !

Spare him, I tell you. Let it not be said
That this young Freedom wallowed in a slime
Of blood and mud, and that the guiltless climb
The guillotine to dye our standards red.

I who am dying come to vote for life,
And hear a sea of hatred roaring high
Around a single head. The air is rife

With fear and hate. Ye cowards, vote as I,
Or on yourselves will fall the broad black knife.
I come to vote for mercy, and to die.

MADemoiselle DE SOMBREUIL TO LIBERTY.

(1793.)

AND if I drink this glass of human blood,
You'll spare my father ?—Never, at a ball,
Foamed wine so welcome. Give ; I'll drain it
all.

Oh, never vintage flowed in such a flood !

You bid me drink to Freedom ? Very good :

It's red as Freedom's sunset which you call

Her glorious sunrise. See, I let none fall ;

For I as well as you have Freedom wooed.

O Liberty, O thou upon whose face,

Divine and pure and infinitely fair,

These men have never looked and never will,

I drink to thee in this terrific place

This toast of guiltless blood ; and if my prayer

Can reach God's throne the world shall see thee still !

KOSCIUSKO TO THE CORPSE OF POLAND.

(1796.)

NOW thou art dead. The sheet which Winter wove
Of whitest snow to hide thy corpse away
Is reddened through and through, and no
Spring ray
Will warm thee back, O Freedom's butchered love.
And if at times thou still shalt seem to move,
'Twill be but like the dead, who, as some say,
Shift in their graves when black eclipse turns day
To unexpected night in heaven above.
Dead, dead, quite dead! Henceforward thou shalt be
A ghost that ever and anon shall come
To scare the nations at their revelry :
A sudden chill shall hush their joyous hum,
And there upon their threshold they shall see
Thy phantom standing motionless and dumb.

LORD EDWARD FITZGERALD TO THE SPRING OF
NINETY-EIGHT.

(1798.)

A GREEN victorious standard is unfurled :
The bright green levies come ; they come, they
come,
With fife of birds and martial insect hum,
As, bud by bud, the Spring invades the world ;
And every furry creature that lay curled
Between the roots of trees, asleep and numb,
Joins Nature's insurrectionary drum,
And tyrant Winter from his throne is hurled.
Thy bright green standard, O victorious Spring,
More fortunate than mine, is waving high
On every bough where thrush and linnet sing ;
Nature is uttering her triumphal cry ;
Fresh life is meted to each living thing,—
Save in the prisons, where the death-doomed lie.

THE LAST DOGE TO FETTERED VENICE.

(1799.)

I SAW a phantom sitting in her rags
Upon a throne that sea-gods wrought of old ;
Her tatters, stamped with blazonry of gold,
Seemed made of remnants of victorious flags ;
Her face was fair, though wrinkled like a hag's,
And in the sun she shivered as with cold ;
While round her breast she tightened each torn fold
To hide her chains, more thick than felon drags.
O Venice, in the silence of the night,
I think of when thy vessels used to bring
The gems and spices of the plundered East
Up to thy feet, and like an endless flight
Of hurrying sea-birds, on a broad white wing,
Heaped up the gift that ever still increased.

SYDNEY WHARTON TO A DOSE OF HASCHICH.

(1804.)

THOU that canst whirl me in a magic swoon
Through caverns filled with phosphorescent
snakes,
Across the earth's red central lava lakes,
And on a dragon to the ice-blue moon ;
Or ocean orchards which the mermen prune
With knives of gold, and where the drowned man
wakes ;
Or halls of ruby, brighter than the flakes
Of crimson glory that the dawn has strewn :
Vouchsafe to whirl me once again to-night,
Through endless dreams of beauty or of fear—
Through endless realms of horror or delight.
Oh, whirl me where thou wilt,—away from here,
Where all is petty, colourless, and trite,
And every minute like a dragging year !

SIDNEY WHARTON TO THE WORLD.

(1805.)

I F I could have my will, the sun should freeze,
And this huge earth spin on, for ever blind,
With all the bones of beasts and of mankind,
And sapless petrifications of the trees ;
While through the lifeless plains and rigid seas,
With its triumphant dirge, the howling wind,
The only moving thing still left behind,
Should sweep the desert like an organ's keys.
Out on this tossing theatre of shame,
In which the gorgeous curtain of the dawn,
All painted o'er with trembling crocus-flame,
Is raised each day on slaves that bite and fawn,
And play their endless heart-benumbing game,
Year in, year out, Dishonour's countless spawn !

THE CAPTIVE OF FENESTRELLE TO HIS
FLOWER.

(1805.)

PALE plantlet that hast sprouted up between
The loosened flagstones of my prison floor
When I well-nigh could recollect no more,
What meant on earth the very colour green ;

Thou tiny sweetheart that hast never seen
The sun, nor felt the breezes of the shore ;
I kneel in silent rapture and adore
Thy beauty, like the lover of a queen.

Thou art the murmurous woods, the waving corn,
The seeded grass, where babbling streamlets run,
The rosary of dewdrops on the thorn ;

Thou art all Nature, with her charms each one,
When least expected, suddenly new-born
In this dull cell, to fill my heart with sun.

MURAT TO HIS WHIP.

(1810.)

THOU post-boy's whip, thou old black knotted lash,
Which once I bartered for the lash of war,
Quitting my jogging grays, to ride afar
Destruction's sombre steed, amid the crash
Of battle-thunder and the purple splash
Of blood-pools, on that road whose milestones are
Great victories,—beneath a dazzling star,—
Whose ruts are heaps of dead that gun-wheels gash,
I keep thee that I never may forget
The smoky post-room and the coarse black bread,
The heavy boots, the saddles dripping wet,
Or that bare wooden bench, on which my head
Found quicker slumber than it now can get
Upon the satin of a royal bed.

NAPOLEON TO A ST. HELENA LEAF.
(1820.)

I SIT and hold my empire in my hand :
Thou, shrivelled leaf, thou, thing ephemeral,
Flecked as with faded bloodstains, thou art all
The length, the breadth, the girth of my command.
I see between thy veinings every land,
From Vistula to Tagus, in my thrall :
Now crumble up within my hand, and fall
Into black dust, thou sum of all I planned.
Is that the moaning of a tropic storm ?
Its roar will soothe the gnawing in my side.
The thunder growls like cannon. Legions form
Among the shifting clouds, and multiplied
Battalions rush to conquest, swarm on swarm.
Gnaw, vulture, gnaw : the Titan's firmly tied.

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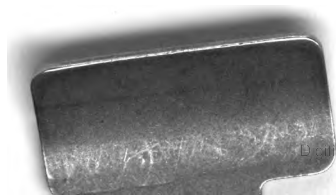
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